



Fracture Dark

2,257 Words

This short story came from a simple verbal conversation between myself and another person.

There was a misunderstanding created when the other individual totally misheard something I had said and interpreted this simple exchange as something more sinister.

Although, this error was quickly cleared up, it left me with a great idea for the following sinister short story – *Fracture Dark*

Fracture Dark

I awoke abruptly, wrapped in the bed sheets, the sweat-soaked material clinging to me like a second skin, the residual image of my dream, a sea of sleeping faces. As I lifted my head from the damp pillow, I heard a piercing hiss harmonised with a screeching klaxon. Gradually, the hiss mellowed into the sough of wind through the trees and the blaring klaxon dwindled to a subdued car alarm somewhere off in the distance.

Then the dream was gone, diffused like morning mist.

“Are you okay, darling?”

I could make out the silhouette of my wife, Carol, propped up on one elbow. She reached out to soothe me.

“You’re soaking wet,” she said.

“Bad dream,” I said, laughing at the absurdity of it. “Can’t really remember what it was about. Just lots of sleeping faces. Kinda creepy.”

“Probably a nightmare about those little horrors you teach.”

I shrugged and lay back, my skin goose-pimpled as the sweat evaporated. I began to doze off again.

“Micro Fissure.”

My eyes snapped open. “What did you say?”

“Might know for sure,” Carol repeated. “By tomorrow.”

“Know what?”

“When we can move to the new house,” she said. “Estate agent said he’d call.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.”

The following morning I was drinking coffee by the patio doors when Carol came into the kitchen.

“I’m going to miss this place,” I said, wistfully. “Especially the garden.”

“We could stay if you’re happy to pay the repair bill,” Carol shouted from the kitchen. “In case you hadn’t noticed it’s falling down around our ears. The new house has a garden too, you know.”

“It’s just familiarity,” I said. “The other place is just so far away and, well, different.”

“We’ll get used to it.”

My daughter came into the kitchen and sat at the table. I walked back to the coffee pot and poured myself a second cup whilst Carol made breakfast for her. She was cracking an egg, the transit of the yolk to the frying pan seemed interminable. I could see individual spits of hot fat erupting around the mucus. Sounds around me lost depth, my daughter's laughter suddenly hollow, the echoey clatter of cutlery against plates. Then everything snapped back to normality.

Carol was studying me, her brow furrowed with concern. “You were miles away then,” she said. “You look tired. Perhaps you should take some time off, what with the move coming up.”

“I can’t,” I said. “It’s exam time. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

My son entered the kitchen wrestling with a bulky package. He was twelve and had just started at the local comprehensive, a mile from the school where I taught.

“What’s that, Ben?” I asked.

“Religious studies homework. It’s supposed to be a replica of Noah’s ark,” he said, “but the card wasn’t thick enough and it’s torn. I don’t have any animals to put inside either,” he added, despondently.

“When do you have to hand it in?” I asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Well, you could use the animals from your sister’s old farmyard toy in the loft,” I suggested. “And I could get some stronger card from school and we could make it again tonight.”

Ben brightened. “That’d be great, dad.”

“Better get a move on, Michael, or you’ll be late for work,” Carol said.

I left the house just as the rain started. The wipers worked hard against the downpour, the windows quickly steaming up despite the heater. I cracked a window and the hissing returned. Just the

wet tyres on a rain-soaked road, I thought, but when I closed the window to block it out, it remained. I tried to shake my head clear of it but there was a sudden harsh splintering sound as a stone chip struck the windscreen. The car swerved, tyres squealing with the abrupt manoeuvre. I eased back on the accelerator, slowed down and pulled into a lay-by. The glass had a small puncture at the point of impact and stress fractures radiating out from the centre.

Without warning, a large, spider-like thing scuttled across the windscreen. I cried out, pressing myself back into the seat, instinctively turning away in fear. When I looked again it had gone. I tried to recall what I had seen in that split-second. The details were hazy but the one overriding impression was not of something organic, but mechanical. Had it been a fatigue fuelled hallucination? I wound down the window and laying on the side of the road was a fallen branch, its gnarled branchlets giving it an arachnid-like appearance. I laughed at my foolishness.

“It's going to be one of those days,” I told myself, forlornly.

I arrived at the school late and had missed the first period. I had twenty minutes to gather myself before I confronted the bottom set of year eleven, a nightmare on a good day. True to form they were their normal monstrous selves and I took a certain satisfaction in confiscating a set of AirPods and handing out several detentions.

The morning break saw me escaping to the staff room where I met up with my friend and colleague Simon Deakes, a PE teacher.

“What happened to you this morning?” Deakes asked, as he sipped his mug of tea.

“My windscreen was damaged,” I said. I told him about what I thought I had seen crawling across the glass.

“Scared by a branch,” Deakes teased. “You’re the scientist, Mike. You should know that broken glass distorts things. The frosted glass in my bathroom window even makes my wife look like Marilyn Munroe.”

“That makes perfect sense,” I said. “I guess the shock of the windscreen cracking made me imagine it all.”

“Unless you’re on the happy juice,” Deakes said. “Either that or you’re turning into the archetypal mad scientist.”

I nodded. “Teaching is the certain path to insanity.”

“Amen to that,” Deakes agreed. “And the holidays are just not long enough.”

We both laughed.

“Gotta go,” Deakes said. “I’m on cover after break.”

“What you got?”

“Geography.”

“Don’t get lost,” I quipped.

“*Hull breach!*”

I turned towards my friend. His voice had sounded so robotic and although Simon was good at mimicking things, I doubted he was that good.

“What’s that about a hull breach?” I asked.

“It’s dull to teach,” he said. “I was talking about geography. You need your ears checking out as well as your marbles.”

“Well, oddly enough, I have been experiencing a loud hissing in my ears recently,” I said.

“Probably a touch of Tinnitus,” he said and added in an exaggeratedly loud voice. “Old people get it, you know.”

“Yeah? Well at least none of my joints are squeaking,” I countered.

“Occupational hazard,” he called over his shoulder as he left the staff room.

The rest of my day was less hectic until finally, at the end of school, I retired to a quiet empty classroom to do some marking.

“*Compromised care pods!*”

I looked up from my marking. A boy was slouched before me, chewing gum.

“What was that you said, Brian?”

“Come for my AirPods, sir.”

I reached into my desk and removed the small device, handing it to the boy. He immediately shoved the earpieces in and turned to walk away.

“Don’t let me see them in class again, Brian,” I shouted after him but the music was already throbbing in his ears, drowning out the mundanities of the school.

On my way home I stopped to have a new windscreen fitted. I sat in the empty waiting room listening to the radio. Just slightly under the sound of the music I could hear a whispering, as if the station wasn’t properly tuned and another station was leaking into the one I was listening to. I could hear a phrase repeated over and over. I leaned in close to the speaker and listened.

‘Essential back-up systems down.’

One of the mechanics came into the waiting room.

“We’ve finished fitting your windscreen, Mr Walker.”

I straightened up from the speaker. “I could hear something odd coming out of your radio,” I said. “Sounded like, essential back-up systems down.”

Just then a burst of static hissed from the radio followed by a voice.

“Send Chelle back up Simmons town.”

Then Ed Sheeran was back singing something.

The mechanic smiled. “Oh, that. It’s the taxi company next door. We often get crossover.”

I decided that Simon was probably right. With the hissing and mishearing everything, perhaps all I needed was to get my ears checked out or cleaned out.

I arrived home just after five and helped Ben reconstruct the Noah’s ark in his bedroom. Later, I ate a light meal and fell asleep on the sofa in front of the television. I awoke a little after nine feeling breathless and a little light headed. The hiss was back with a vengeance. Ben was on the floor watching TV and his sister was curled up asleep on the settee beside Carol.

“I’ll take Ben up,” she said. “Can you carry Jenny?”

Carol ushered Ben upstairs while I scooped up Jenny from the settee. She stirred but didn’t wake. I could hear her muttering under her breath.

“Li... upp... ort... pro... cols... rupted.”

I brushed the hair from her face. “Shhh darling, it's bed time.”

I carried her up to bed and as I lay her down she rubbed her eyes sleepily and spoke again. “Life support protocols corrupted, daddy.”

The technical words sounded strange coming from a child's mouth. I wondered if I had heard wrong.

“Jenny, honey, what did you say? Say it again for daddy.”

Jenny opened her eyes and yawned. “Life support protocols corrupted, daddy.”

Perhaps it was something she'd heard in a TV program. I called to Carol who came into the bedroom with Ben.

“Listen to this,” I said. “Say what you just said again, darling.”

This time there was a hint of impatience in her tone as she repeated the phrase. “Life support protocols corrupted, daddy.”

“Did you hear that?” I asked. “Where did she get that from?”

Carol smiled and said, “Structural integrity compromised, darling.” She gave Jenny her teddy and tucked her in.

I felt suddenly very cold and the hissing in my ears seemed very loud now. Over the other side of the room Ben was climbing into his bed.

“Bio pod beyond repair, dad,” he said. “Essential back-up systems non-operational.”

I laughed. “Okay, good joke, you got the old man.”

Carol frowned at me. She placed a concerned hand on my arm. “Life support protocols corrupted, darling. Shutdown procedures are imminent.”

I backed away from her. “This is not funny anymore,” I shouted. “I want you all to stop now.”

Carol looked surprised at my outburst. Jenny began to cry and through her sobs she said, “Termination of all systems imminent, daddy.”

Carol took a step towards me. “Damage irreparable. Organism Irretrievable.”

I suddenly began to feel very breathless and dizzy. The hissing in my ears was getting louder. I fell to the floor, knocking from the dressing table the model ark I'd built earlier with Ben. It struck the floor, breaking apart.

"Fracture dark," Ben sobbed.

"I don't understand, Ben," I gasped.

"Fracture dark," he repeated.

And the dark did finally come. The swirling light patterns cast by the bed lamp began to fade to darkness.

And then silence.

The light returned, harsh and artificial. I opened my eyes. I was lying in a glass pod. There was barely any room to move in the confined space. A multitude of tubes emerged at different points on my body with a variety of colourful liquids flowing into me and being removed from me. I noticed the top of my pod had been damaged, like my car windscreen, and there were splintered cracks all over the surface, the harsh sound of hissing as the air escaped through the hairline fissures. As I looked up through the crazed glass surface I could see thousands of similar pods all occupied by sleeping people. And through a nearby observation port I could see the starlit backdrop of space.

Small mechanical spider-like devices were crawling over my pod trying to repair the damage. I realised that the last phrase uttered by my son hadn't been fracture dark but had, in fact, been fractured ark.

As the memory suppressors began to wear off, I remembered everything. I was in a spaceship, an ark, and like the narrative in the virtual world I had inhabited during the voyage, we were heading to a new home, fleeing our old, decimated Earth, a world we had devastated by our own stupidity and shortsightedness.

As the ship slowly rotated I could see a planet slipping into view. It was green like Earth with crystal blue oceans but that was where the similarity ended. This was an alien world orbiting a small red star.

I tried to call out but could hardly breathe now. There was no oxygen in the interior of the ark, only that which was required for each individual pod. A klaxon was screaming through the pod's internal speaker system and a mechanical computer voice was saying the same phrase over and over. *"Danger. Essential back-up systems non-operational. Life support protocols corrupted. Structural integrity is compromised."*

Then the spider devices just stopped and turned their attention to another, less damaged, pod. The computer voice changed its message.

"Micro meteor threat neutralised. Casualties minimised within accepted parameters. Unit 25,342C, Walker, irretrievable. Structural integrity compromised. Essential back-up systems non-operational. Life support protocols corrupted."

"Commence organic recycling procedure."